Partnerships for Health

The number one grossing movie in the Unites States last week was "A Civil Action", an adaptation of Jonathan Harr's best selling novel which details the true story of one small town devastated by lethal groundwater pollution that allegedly contributed to the deaths of numerous children in the community. The incident triggered a lawsuit alleging corporate liability for the leukemia deaths and widespread medical problems in the community. While the epic courtroom drama may dominate the movie, the film's significant public health component should inspire us to take a closer look at the multi-layered system that works every day to protect the public's health. The question we should all be asking is, "Could it happen here?". The answer, without a doubt, is yes, but it can be avoided through the establishment of a permanent community process to ensure meaningful participation in all decisions that may affect, negatively or positively, the community's health. Prince William Partnerships for Health is a coalition working to establish this community process and ensure community participation in the public health system.

Many of you may be asking yourself, "What exactly is public health?". Our public health system provides an invisible safety net to our entire society. Its past success stories have included the eradication of polio, smallpox, and other highly contagious diseases that once devastated communities here and around the world. At present, our public health system does battle against a resurgence of tuberculosis, hepatitis, and a wide range of water-borne, food-borne, and air-borne contaminants. Because these threats to the public's health can affect any of us, our public health system protects all of us.

However, the public health system alone cannot protect all of us against every health threat. Protecting the public's health requires strong partnerships. Our public health system is most effective when policymakers, businesses, health care workers and individuals are working collaboratively within the public health system. Policymakers need to ensure that prevention efforts and the public health infrastructure are adequately funded. Businesses must set good examples by properly handling food and waste. Health care workers must work to improve the health of our population, and individuals must learn how to protect themselves and others from infectious disease.

Just as we are all a part of preserving our public's health, we are also each at risk when the delicate balance of responsibility between individuals, businesses, health care providers and policymakers breaks down. Our highly mobile society assures that potential threats to the public's health from contaminated food and contagious individuals can now move easily from city to city and state to state. Our overburdened and underfunded public health system has already begun to face the challenges presented by imported food products contaminated by inadequately treated water. In addition, our increasing population of individuals exposed to tuberculosis in other countries demands future monitoring and treatment capabilities that our present system currently lacks.

Our nation's past success in confronting public health challenges of smallpox, polio and tuberculosis provides convincing evidence that investing in prevention and control does bring significant and obvious results. But the

recent emergence of drug-resistant strains of several infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, reminds us that yesterday's successes are poor predictors of our readiness to deal with tomorrow's threats. We cannot afford to let this trend continue.

To continue battling growing health threats, the public health system needs a broader constituency of support form individuals, businesses, faith communities, and medical providers who all have a stake in public health. Currently, a multi-state initiative known locally as Prince William Partnerships for Health and nationally as Turning Point, is working to broaden the coalition of public health stakeholders beyond public health workers and medical providers to include businesses and civic, faith and community groups. Working together, these groups are creating a new type of community-based, cross-institutional public health system that will share valuable resources and a common-sense belief that everyone has a stake in public health.

Public health tragedies, such as the featured in the movie *A Civil Action*, ought to serve as a reminder to us all that maintaining public health is a community effort. The tools needed to protect our public health include prevention, detection, education and intervention. Public support for investing in public health will ensure that adequate resources exist to both deal with unexpected outbreaks and to continue critical preventive public health education. As we prepare to face the challenges of a new millennium, our community must recommit itself to investing in a public health system that truly serves the interests of each and every person. Our collective investment must stand as a continuing reminder that we are all the *public* in public health.